

HOW TO BE A CRITIC

By John Muri

Reviewing concerts is a tricky as well as a difficult business. In a social organization like ours, we have to be careful when we criticize the work of fellow-members, especially when they play without remuneration. To them we should be grateful and gracious for their gifts. Truth ought to be told, but we have to be careful not to hurt needlessly. There now seems to be a loud call for more objectivity in reviewing, except when one's self or his friends are involved. One reviewer said recently that all the organ concerts in his region were good. He's lucky. What do you say when you get a bad one — a dull, a noisy, or a sloppy one?

Reviewers are always getting into trouble. Several of them who write for music publications other than THEATRE ORGAN have a way of becoming abusive to artists and to their readers who protest. Artists can usually be expected to study their reviews word by word, searching for innuendo and subtle attack, and their fans do not hesitate to rise in defense of their favorites.

In reporting what an artist has played, one should not find it necessary to accompany each statement with a gushing phrase. Years ago I learned to be suspicious of people who always use adjectives. Adjectives permit one to qualify any forthright statement into words that say almost nothing in too many words. After a couple of strained compliments, one is overwhelmed by insincerity that is born of a desire to please.

In spite of our best efforts, each of us has his prejudices. A critic might say, "Winker has a tendency to play more wrong notes than he should because of his consuming desire to create elaborate tonal patterns and moving musical figures" or "He is sometimes too ambitious, both in choice of repertory and in complexity of technique." That doesn't seem too radical. Maybe we ought to develop our own language. If the playing is bad we might say that "His technique is not always quite clear." We might take a cue from the rock-music crowd,

from whom I copy the following gems: "He was in funky soul mood, probably from eating too many ground nuts" and "He was only fairly superb last night." If the program is full of musical cliches like "Tea for Two", "Ebb Tide", etc., we can list them as "old favorites" or "request numbers", even though most of the requests are made by the organists themselves or their entourages who perform on cue. Maybe we can find a use for a term like "educated funk."

Speaking of prejudice, I prefer to listen to new and interesting materials, be they popular or classic. Many of our people think that classics have little or no place in theatre organ presentations. If not, then what were we doing when we accompanied silent dramatic films fifty years ago? In those days we were hired to play much more classic or semi-classic music than popular.

We have those who are cynical about the whole business and say that most listeners have little or no critical faculties. They say that our favorite organist is the one that we have just heard. Sometimes I think that it has become fashionable to praise or condemn a player, regardless of variations in the quality of his work. I know one organist about whom nobody ever says anything condemnatory. I know another who is unique in that I have never heard a soul say anything good about him.

We can do better than that. Let us list some things to watch out for. Did the artist work too hard at the console? Is he a show-off? It may be that you like that sort of thing; then say so and give the player credit. The audience response, one way or another, should be reported accurately. Was the programming too heavy with classics that were never a part of theatre organ literature? Did the program include too many numbers that have been over-played? Has the organist played the same music too often? If he is getting a reputation for it, he ought to be told for his own good.

Did the performance show care in rehearsal and preparation? Or was it a spontaneous, extemporized session, in which the artist trusted to inspiration to carry him through? Were there any major accidents, like turning on the drums in the middle of a soft passage, or blasting on the post horn during a sweet ballad? Did he push the cancel piston by accident? Did he play too many wrong notes? Was his use of the pedal too heavy or just right?

Does he talk too much in trying to educate the audience? Most of the program-note kind of explanation might well be omitted. Who needs a lecture on Ravel, Saint-Saens, or Grieg at a pop organ concert? Gustav Mahler had the right idea when he said, "Down with program notes! They propagate false ideas! The audience should be left to its own thoughts about the work that is being played."

Judging the more technical and elaborate performances of classical works that several of our organists are using requires familiarity with the music, preferably a playing knowledge of it. The well-prepared organist will play the notes as they are written — exactly. The sloppy organist will avoid playing a rapid sequence of notes by playing the whole group as a single chord. He may take a sequence of thirds and play it as single notes. In some cases he may even leave out the difficult passage entirely.

Here the critic has to make one very important decision; is he willing to accept distortions or re-arrangements of the music written by standard composers? Will he accept with pleasure a serious change in tempo, such as one player has used in Chopin's "Fantasie Impromptu" wherein the middle passage (which can be heard as the pop tune "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows") is played in strict 4-4 rhythm without the 2-against-3 pattern prescribed by the composer? Will he accept a greatly accelerated tempo in a virtuoso performance of "Flight of the Bumble Bee" or the Widor Toccata? How much can he stand in the way of unusual harmonic progressions applied to popular songs of the twenties or thirties?

It's a puzzlement. I cannot recall ever hearing at the Chicago Theatre — in the days when musical director Nathaniel Finston made that house a model for theatre music and production — any tampering with the rhythm or harmony of a composer's

intention. Arthur Dunham, a fine organist and director of music at the Chicago Tivoli Theatre, often said that every musical figure and nuance can be written between bar-lines and that our duty was to follow the composer's intentions, because the man who wrote the music was in all likelihood a better musician than we were.

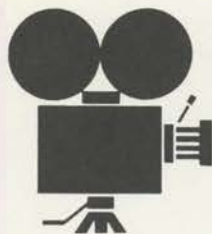
A word should be said about the touring organist who tries to ingratiate himself with audiences by telling double-meaning jokes and using offensive language. There is no call for us to join the filth crowd. Any organist who thinks he has to resort to smut had better get back to the practice room and stay out of the concert field until he is sure he can be a good performer and a gentleman at the same time.

When we praise or blame, let us give the evidence for it in specifics of performance. Without these, there is ground for strong suspicion that the program was merely ordinary or little better than that. In 1630 John Milton said, "Organ music could dissolve me into ecstasies and bring all heaven before mine eyes." Let's have organists who work at doing just that and reviewers who can bring us the news. □

THEATRE ORGAN CIRCULATION

— APRIL, 1973 —

1. California820	29. Kansas20
2. Michigan353	30. Kentucky18
3. New York315	31. Utah16
4. Illinois303	Wash. D.C.16
5. Ohio249	32. Tennessee15
6. Penna.215	33. N. Dakota11
7. New Jersey191	34. Miss.10
8. Washington136	35. Louisiana9
9. Mass.126	36. Rhode Is.9
10. Indiana117	37. Nebraska7
11. Conn.109	38. S. Carolina7
12. Maryland108	39. West Va.7
13. Florida89	40. Nevada6
14. Oregon86	41. New Mex.6
15. Iowa80	42. Maine5
16. Virginia75	43. New Hamp.5
17. Missouri60	44. Arkansas4
18. Texas56	45. Alaska3
19. Colorado51	46. S. Dakota3
20. Georgia51	47. Vermont3
21. Minnesota51	48. Wyoming2
22. Arizona49	49. Idaho1
23. Wisconsin48	50. Montana1
24. Hawaii41	4077
25. N. Carolina39	Foreign52
26. Oklahoma28	Canadian67
27. Alabama25	Total 4196
28. Delaware22	



Hollywood Cavalcade

Directed by Lyle W. Nash

RARELY have the inner workings of a film studio and the dreams, ambitions and working patterns of a renowned motion picture creator been so dissected as in *Memo from David O. Selznick*. Author Rudy Behlmer has scanned thousands of memos, telegrams, letters and office copy of DOS and produced this fascinating book. It begins in 1926 and ends with a 1962 memo saying in part: "... to me, it is heartbreaking."

IN 1928 DOS submitted many main title suggestions to Paramount. He received \$100 for each used. He was very good at this. Three of his titles ("Dirigible, Submarine and Flight") were sold to Columbia... In 1934 he wrote: "... Beau Geste and Merry Widow (1925) are still my favorite pictures of all time."

NEW FACES always were a goal of DOS. About Katharine Hepburn he wrote: "... Everyone was shocked silly... when rushes first shown... gloom was thick... Not until preview ("Bill of Divorcement") was staff convinced we had a great screen personality... Fred Astaire... a little uncertain... enormous ears and bad chin line... his charm is so tremendous... favor signing him."

"OCTOBER 1938... A few observations about *Intermezzo*... Ronald Colman and William Powell both refused the lead... Best I think... Charles Boyer and Loretta Young... I note Bergman (Ingrid) is 5'9½" tall... Is it possible?... Actually, Hedy Lamarr was established purely by photography..."

CASTING of *Gone With the Wind*, GWTW, was most notable film task ever undertaken. The role of Scarlett

O'Hara was most coveted role in films. Among those considered: Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Miriam Hopkins, Tallulah Bankhead, Norma Shearer, Paulette Goddard, Doris Jordan, Jean Arthur, Katharine Hepburn, Loretta Young, Ann Sheridan, Lana Turner, Joan Bennett, Susan Hayward, Frances Dee, Margaret Tallichet, Lucille Ball, Claudette Colbert, Margaret Sullavan and Carole Lombard.

AT FIRST DOS was only luke warm to GWTW. Warner's had an option on book for a time but let it drop. Gable was the only real serious star considered for Rhett part. Gable bluntly told all he would not consider any phony Southern accent attempts.

IF Vivien Leigh had not come along, who would have been Scarlett? We can only guess. The finalists for the part were Hepburn, Arthur, Bennett and Young.

COULD you imagine a Bette Davis Scarlett and an Errol Flynn Rhett? Or Gary Cooper as Rhett? All such castings were given thought. Janet Gaynor was once thought about for Melanie, Leslie Howard first scorned the weak, watery character of Ashley Wilkes. Joan Fontaine shunned the part of Melanie. DOS never considered anyone but Howard for the Wilkes part.

ONE powerful reason Clark Gable played Rhett was he got a \$100,000. bonus. He needed the money badly for a divorce settlement.

VIEWPOINT: Hollywood probably never had another greater one-man film creator than DOS. Even the great DWGriffith did not concern himself with costume detail, financing detail and minor considerations as did DOS. In 38 years DOS created some 66 films some more memorable than most of his contemporaries. He truly was one of Hollywood's towering figures.

NEXT MONTH we revert to our item type column with bits and pieces about people, places and things. Correspondence about the column is welcome to P.O. Box 113, Pasadena, California 91102. □

It's Fun!

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